

Interview with Lloyd Wineland III
Conducted by Linda Byrne for the Providence District History Project
Providence Perspective

Linda Byrne: Today is November 23, 2007; I am Linda Byrne and am interviewing Lloyd Wineland III, who is visiting here from Kentucky. Lloyd grew up in the Washington, DC area and is part of a family that was involved in movie theatres in the 40's, 50's, and 60's through the mid 80's in the Washington, DC and Virginia area. Good afternoon Lloyd.

Lloyd Wineland: Hi Linda.

Linda: Could you tell me a little something about yourself to start off with?

Lloyd: I am Linda Byrne's younger brother and I was born in 1949 in Washington, DC, and my family had been in the theatre business for 25 years up to that point. I grew up in the business and spent from the time I was 15, which was in 1965 until 1985 that was 20 years in the business myself. I started working at the Super Chief Drive In on the day I received my driver's license on my 16th birthday.

Wineland Theaters were established in 1922 in Southeast, Washington and grew to include theaters in Fairfax and Loudon County, Virginia; Prince George's County, MD, and Washington, DC and actually built the original Tyson's Corner theatre which was a free standing building in the mid 60's. It was actually the first freestanding twin theatre in Tyson's Corner. Subsequent to that we had in the mid 70's a freestanding twin theatre at Reston. One had several hundred seats and the other had 500. I can remember selling out the large auditorium with Amadeus and also sold out that same theatre with Woody Allen and Mia Farrow in Hannah and Her Sisters.

At any rate, we also had a theatre in Loudon County, Sterling Park that was a triple screen theatre. These were all products of my dad who researched the area, living in the Fairfax area at the time and operating theatres in

Prince George's County, MD and DC and he had researched Fairfax and Loudon County.

A lot of this was all due to the Beltway. We had theatres in different beltway locations different exits far enough away from each other; one extreme being Oxon Hill, New Carrollton, Bowie and the other extreme being Tyson's Corner. So he had researched all that and bought the properties, so he was a one-man show. All the credit belongs to him and it worked beautifully while he was the CEO.

Linda: How did this original theatre chain get started?

Lloyd: In 1922 my grandfather, Lloyd J. Wineland was a gunsmith at the Navy Yard, a machinist and was also a Mason who belonged to the Masonic Lodge in Anacostia in Southeast Washington. He and Elsie Pezold were married in 1913 and in 1917 my dad came along and in 1922 when my dad was 5 years old his dad figured they wanted a little something more, so they figured out a way to rent the Masonic Hall on weekends. He ran the projector that he leased and my grandmother played the piano as there was no sound track as yet in those days. My dad at the age of 8 sold the candy. He walked around with the candy stand attached to his waist like the old cigarette holders. He had Mars bars, Clark Bars, etc. It was a family operation with the three of them from 1922 until 1929 at which time my granddad had established himself and was situated so he could build a theater. At that point he built the Anacostia Theater a block from the Fairlawn Theatre, which was the old Masonic Lodge. So he built the theatre, managed it and booked the movies. He then took on a partner by the name of Hollingsworth who became a fulltime film booker for the two theatres.

Linda: What is a Booker?

Lloyd: It is one that keeps up with, books and buys the upcoming product film and it is a full time job because they have to attend previews, screenings 90 days in advance of the public seeing them. At that time you bid on the movies in financial terms and length of run. If you had a theater

across town and “Gone with the Wind” was coming out, you had to outbid your competitors in terms of length and percentage. So Mr. Hollingsworth did the bookings and my grandfather acted as manager and general manager of the theaters and they had a very successful relationship for a number of years.

In addition to the Fairlawn and Anacostia, they built the Congress, the Highland, Coral, and Atlantic. In southeast Washington they pretty much had the business sewed up and of course in those days there was no television or VCR’s so the theaters changed their product twice weekly. With the advent of air-conditioning, the movie theatre became the place where most people first experienced this comfort that most of us take for granted today. We actually had signs outside that invited the public in to the theatre to take advantage of this wonderful new gimmick.

Linda: So before they had air-conditioning they did have movie theaters, were they hot?

Lloyd: Yes, I guess they were, but that was before my time. You went to the library; department stores and saw newsreels at the movies and everybody had fans in their hands, so I guess the same thing was true of movie theaters. The two things I remember as a highlight of my youth were the advent of air conditioning in movie theaters, and of course television was the next big thing that rocked the movie theaters on its heels. That is when the movie industry came up with full color movies and cinemascope to combat television.

Linda: So how many theaters did your family have?

Lloyd: The high-water mark was 17 theaters, which included all of southeast Washington.

When the Beltway came in and then suburban Maryland and Virginia was then added. The Marlow Heights Theater was first suburban theater and it was the highest grossing theater in the first five years of its existence of any theater in the Washington area and you had to go to New York and

Chicago to find a higher grossing single screen theater in the country for the first five years it was open.

Linda: The Marlow Theater was located where?

Lloyd: Marlow Heights, Maryland, Branch Avenue just about 2 miles from southeast Washington; but it was a real modern shopping center or strip center and it had a state of the art design and it featured the first suburban Hecht Company. It was one of the first shopping centers that had an exit on the Capitol Beltway, and access to downtown Washington D.C. It helped start the beginning of the Prince Georges County Maryland residential housing phenomenon. It was a beautiful location.

At the same time the (Marlow) theater was built there was a resurgence in Hollywood and they came out with such blockbuster's as The Sound of Music and Lawrence of Arabia and the Sean Connery as James Bond series, just to name a few. The Marlow Theater was at the right place at the right time. This was not by accident, but by design of my dad. This was a brilliant thing and it really established him on the map, as I said the Marlow was the highest grossing theater for the first five years of its existence on the east coast, excluding New York City.

Linda: These were all in door theaters. How about drive-ins?

Lloyd: Lloyd J. Wineland at first wanted nothing to do with drive-ins, they were passion pits in his estimation.

Linda: That was your grandfather?

Lloyd: Yes, my dad recognized the importance of drive-ins and also of protecting your turf. Sidney Lust built the Hillside Drive-In on Marlboro Pike, which was well within the zone that my dad figured that he needed to control. The Hillside Drive-In proved to be a novelty and did tremendous business as most drive-ins at that time were doing. There were almost 5,000 drive-in theatres in the country by 1965 and today there are only 400.

So I don't think it was something that my dad talked his father into easily. But they kept monitoring the grosses and at the same time there was a drive-in being built on Indian Head Highway which was very close to the Marlow Theater so they had to make a pretty quick decision as to whether they were going to get into drive-in's or not.

I believe most of the decisions were probably based on the fact that they needed to protect their turf, so they decided to jump in and they bought the Hillside Drive-In from Sidney Lust. A short time later he acquired the ABC Drive In right out from under several other potential buyers.

Linda: Where was this drive-in located?

Lloyd: In Oxon Hill on Indian Head Highway which was just a 10 minute drive from the Marlow so they thought it was important that he acquire that. Both of those drive-ins were great moneymakers. They were on 6 to 8 acres of ground and in those days everybody was in love with their automobiles and gas was 32 cents a gallon and kids drove hot rods with no cares in the world about fuel costs and everybody spent Friday shining up their car and going to the drive-ins on Friday and Saturday nights. It was a meeting place. John Wayne and Clint Eastwood and Walt Disney movies were popular. It was a twenty-year period in America where the drive-in was a unique and lucrative business.

Linda: This interview is taking place in my home, which is in the Providence District, Fairfax County, Virginia, and not far from here at one time was the Lee Highway Drive-In. Can you tell us something about that?

Lloyd: I remember the Lee Highway Drive-in as being owned by Sumner Redstone and being a well-run theater. It was a large 700 or 800 car drive-in. Sumner Redstone had theaters all over the United States, primarily in the New England area at that time and he ran a first class operation. He was not in any direct competition with any other theaters at that time as most people figured that the outdoor business and indoor business were two different animals altogether and that the drive-in patron was not prone to frequent indoor theaters. So Lee Highway was a pretty successful drive-in for a long time.

Linda: That area today is being redeveloped and currently there is not a Lee Highway Drive-In, it is now a Multiplex Indoor theater. There will be a theater in the future however; the whole area is being redeveloped with townhouses, condominiums, stores and a shopping mall, which are all being planned for that particular area.

Linda: What other things can you tell me about the theater business in this area over the years and what happened to it.

Lloyd: The Fairfax Theater has had a number of owners. There are a number of people in Fairfax County, that I am aware of, that had theaters and did very well. KB had a theater; Sumner Redstone had a drive-in and indoor theater at the same site. Sumner's theater was built in the 80's, I think, and it had Dolby Stereo, which was new and it also had chandeliers. This was all part of the thinking of the 80's that you wanted to make the theater going experience something that you could not get in the home with video and home theater and that sort of thing. So Redstone decided all of his theaters were going to be palaces and take them back to their hey day in the 30's and 40's with 1,000 seat auditoriums, and the screen which opened with velvet and sheer layers of motorized curtains. It was a totally different experience altogether than watching a film in a multiplex.

Fairfax County was one of the areas that this type of experience first took place. Also we bought the Reston Twin Theater back in the 1980's from a local man, who I haven't kept up with but Renny Staubach was his name. The developers of the Falcon Center built the Reston Twin Cinema and it was pretty successful for him and us.

So I would say between Paul Roth, the Goldman family, Sumner Redstone and later Renny Staubach there were some pretty good theater owners in Fairfax County.

Linda: Over the years we have seen the theaters change from single screen to multi screen and the drive-ins go from, as you said, 5000 to 400 today. Do you see any major influences in society or what was happening in the world that influenced these changes?

Lloyd: My experience as a young person was managing Drive In Movies, a rather short period of time say from my teens to mid 20's. I saw the price of gasoline skyrocket. At that same time VCR's came into being, movies went on video and there were video stores on each street corner or shopping center, so that was a new source of competition for the theatre owner.

The first theaters to feel the brunt of that change were the drive-ins. Drive-ins had been in existence for twenty years and what once were cow pastures were now being sought after by developers for residential and commercial uses, it became pretty easy to figure out that running a drive in movie theater was not the best use of that property. Consequently a lot of the drive-ins because of all those pressures and the money that could be generated turning them into commercial property failed to live through that time. Fortunately or unfortunately, we had several drive-ins that fell into that category.

Theatre owners around this time started multi screening their theatres in part as a way to minimize costs and compete with the ever popular VCR market. Twinning & tripling former single screen theatres led eventually to the giant multiplexes that inhabit most malls and major shopping centers today.

Hollywood was in heaven because they were not only getting revenues from the theaters receipts as they always did, but now the video market was involved and they did not really care what it was doing to the theater owner. It was a money collector for them, with a new audience, a new avenue for making money so they started pumping out more films.

Linda: Was Tyson's Corner Shopping Center Theater one of those?

Lloyd: The original Tyson's Corner Theater was a Wineland Theater and it eventually became a twin. I am not certain which Fairfax County multiplex came in but it was a beltway theater that was just right off the exit, which was popular at that time. 495 was such a popular road that they built a theater right off the exit and people came from all over, it was a habit with

AMC. My dad did that with Tyson's, Carrolton, Marlow, Bowie then AMC did he same thing at the AMC Leesburg, and AMC Greenbelt, Carrolton.

Linda: The theater I remember is one at Tyson's One, we have Tyson's One shopping center and a Tyson's Two now.

Lloyd: This was before the Tyson's two. It was a single screen that was dads. At some point in there we sold the indoor theaters, I neglected to mention that. Wineland Theaters sold their indoor theaters (in 1967 or 68) to Neighborhood Theatres in Richmond, who was looking to gain a presence in the DC area. At that point Wineland Theaters went into real estate and dad went into antiques and real estate speculation. We got out of the theater business for a few years and then went back into it some years later.

Linda: The name of this theater corporation bears your last name?

Lloyd: Wineland Theaters.

Linda: Can you think of anything else that would be interesting to us today about the theaters of yesterday? One of the things that I remember as a child is that some of the theaters had, I believe it was the Highland Theater or possibly the Anacostia Theater in the southeast part of Washington, DC, had a nursery where moms could go with their new infants and their were actually cribs and a picture window, where the mom's could sit there with their babies and cribs and watch the movie.

Lloyd: Yes, there was a glass picture window where the moms could watch the movie. A couple of theaters had that; I believe the Coral Theater had that also. A couple of theaters had balconies, one being the Laurel Theater. We had the largest indoor theater in Maryland at one time with 1200 seats, the Oxon Hill.

Fairfax Circle Theater was one of the premier theaters. They would run selected engagements, for instance I remember Lawrence of Arabia playing there. When a major film would break into the metro area they would play at only one theater in the District, one in Maryland and one in Virginia, so

there would only be three screens for the whole area; and to be in that category for a theatre was real status. I remember Fairfax had a theater that qualified for that. You had to be a theater that was unique in design and seating capacity and be able to warrant that type of business and have a theatre with a reputation being professionally run. The staff wore Tuxedos, Major film companies would send representatives from Hollywood to see if your theatre was appropriate for such a showing. You had to have everything just so, and Fairfax fell into that category, I believe it was KB's at that time.

Linda: Well I understand that after many years of being out of the theater business you are now back in.

Lloyd: Yes, you can't get out for good when it's in your blood. So I am actually third generation theater business and my daughter Kristen, fourth generation theatre business, she's worked at the Stanford Drive-In in Stanford, Kentucky, which is an hour below Lexington. Teri and I bought it a couple of years ago and it is actually a drive-in that was built in 1952 and it has been in continual operation ever since as a drive-in. And it is also a flea market that was established 20 years ago. So my daughter is actually the fourth generation Wineland working in the Stanford drive-in and my mom has been there twice and my sister Linda has also worked at the drive-in so it is kind of a kick. It is a successful little drive-in; it is really kind of a hobby, business, and nostalgia type of deal. Like I said, there are only 400 left in the country. We have a lot of fun with it and the area it serves holds it in high regard, it's a landmark.

Linda: You have mentioned earlier that booking is a full-time job for someone, how do you do that today?

Lloyd: Good question. A person like myself for instance with one screen in Kentucky, I pay \$50 a week to a film buying service which in fact has been booking this theater for 25 years. He is a fellow in Lakeland, Florida who books for drive-ins in Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, Tennessee, Florida, Georgia and the Carolinas. He has several hundred screens that he books for. We pay him \$50 a week and he gives us a lot of personal attention. He goes to the screenings and prepares notes. For instance in our theater we try to

run nothing but family entertainment, mostly Walt Disney product, and he is pretty clear on that and that is what we book. If you are a large chain of theaters today you would have your own in house booker or bookers.

Linda: Do you by any chance know a man named Stew Megan, who is connected with the Lee Highway Drive-In; he is a person we will be interviewing with this Providence District history project.

Lloyd: He was probably connected with the day-to-day operation, I did not know him. Lee Highway was a well grossing, well-run theater and that was partly because of Sumner Redstone who kept his places up and ran a quality establishment. I know that because we had Drive Ins, not in that area, but we were in competition with box office grosses from the Lee Highway and Queens Chapel Drive- Ins.

Linda: What would be a good gross for a theater back in the heyday?

Lloyd: Well when I mentioned the Marlow Theater because that was the highest grossing theater that I was exposed to. When it first opened up it was unique and there were a lot of very good films coming out and I remember a gross of \$30,000 the first week of, I am not sure, the Sound of Music or Lawrence of Arabia, or James Bond. In those days when admission was \$1.50 or \$2.00, that is a lot of people in a single screen theater that is a lot of popcorn, I am just talking box office gross your film would range from 50 to 90 percent.

Linda: Well I thank you we will be using this interview as part of the Prospective District here in Fairfax County, Virginia and we appreciate your insight into the motion picture business over the last half century or longer.

Lloyd: My pleasure.